

# State of Mind in the College Classroom

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There's a mental health crisis on today's college campuses. According to research conducted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness: one in four college students have a diagnosable illness, 40 percent do not seek help, 80 percent feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities, and 50 percent have become so anxious that they struggle in school.

How can faculty support students who are facing these issues? Showing students kindness goes a long way. Creating a classroom environment that exudes kindness and concern for students' well-being sends a message to students that not only do we care about them, but we support them. Facilitating this type of classroom environment can enable students to take the necessary steps to approach their instructor when they are having a difficult time. A safe and supportive classroom environment helps students begin a conversation about the challenges they are dealing with during the semester. This in turn can lead faculty to assist a student in exploring support services available to them on campus, so they do not have to suffer in silence.

Faculty need to be willing to have an open dialogue with students about mental health issues and help students be mindful of their wellbeing. Well-being is not simply the absence of mental or physical illness. Rather, it is the more positive connotation of how well your life is going. Well-being encompasses, among other things, emotional health, vitality, satisfaction, life direction, ability to make a difference, the quality of one's relationships, and living a good life (Brzucki, 2016). What is required in higher education today is a systematic process that helps students achieve their educational, career, and personal goals by concentrating on areas of

talent and engagement, dreams and passions. Such a student success strategy will stimulate and support students in their quest for an enriched quality of life. That will, in turn, result in higher student satisfaction, increased retention and graduation rates, and, at the most fundamental level, young adults who are fulfilled and psychologically healthy (Brzycki, 2016).

Catherine Savini (2016) states the work of promoting mental health shouldn't always be outsourced to the counseling center; it must be part of the fabric of our institutions, including our classrooms. In a 2011 survey conducted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness, stigma was identified as the number one barrier to students seeking counseling (Savini, 2016). It is important in higher education to continue to take the necessary steps to reduce stigmatization of mental illness and students' perceptions of seeking support. Through ongoing campus involvement, course discussions, and facilitating a supportive learning environment, students can begin to see that reaching out for the help they deserve is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Here are some approaches instructors can implement to support their students with mental health issues and stressors during the semester:

- The first step is to begin developing a rapport with students and create a safe and respectful learning environment on the first day of classes. Setting aside time on a regular basis in the course to get to know students through discussions, group work, and self-reflective assignments provides opportunities to build connections with them. In turn, they can begin building connections with us as well as a community in the course. These learning experiences may provide valuable insight about students' challenges they are dealing with in their lives. This can lead an instructor to reach out to a student and "check in" with them about how they are managing the course and the semester.
- While reviewing the course syllabus during the first day of classes, it is important to let students know we support them if they are dealing with a mental health issue. Discuss the section of the syllabus that outlines important phone numbers related to support services, such as the counseling center, disability resources, 24-hour suicide prevention hotlines, and the 24-hour crisis center affiliated with your institution.
- It is also important to have students complete a self-reflective assignment in the beginning of the semester and at different points of the semester; preferably the middle and end of the semester. Focus on these key questions: How do you handle stress? Are you faced with challenges this semester? Do you have support? What is one self-care activity you can incorporate into your daily schedule to reduce stress? What did you learn about yourself this semester? This self-reflective assignment promotes mindfulness for students and assists instructors in identifying students who might be struggling, so they can be referred to support services on campus. It also can assist students in developing a greater self-awareness.
- Once a student has disclosed a mental health issue to their instructor, or a student appears to be struggling in the course, it is important for the instructor to schedule an appointment with the student. This provides an opportunity to discuss with the student about how the semester is going for them—course workload, concerns, and

accommodations. This also provides an opportunity to review the support services available to them on campus and off campus.

- After your initial meeting with a student, it can make all the difference to “check in” with them briefly before or after class throughout the semester. For example, a student who is having a difficult time can feel reassured by this gesture and it will give them confidence in their day. It is through this simple act of kindness students “feel” they are supported.
- When a student is feeling supported by their instructor and a crisis arises, a call by the instructor to the counseling center or walking the student over there will be viewed as genuine concern for their well-being.
- Mental health professionals from the counseling center on campus can be invited into the classroom to talk with students about the counseling services available to them and the process to access these services. The visibility of counseling services and collaboration with faculty in higher education will be one of the keys to helping students reach out for help and support.
- Important organizations focusing on college mental health issues can also collaborate with faculty by requesting that information related to campus meetings, events, and other important information be posted on their course page. This will increase awareness about mental health issues and assist students to reach out for help and support as well.
- Catherine Savini (2016) makes a valuable point about the importance of flexibility and awareness in supporting students who are dealing with personal struggles. Instructors who take the initiative to stay informed of how mental illness affects students’ learning and behavior will not only create a positive classroom environment, but they can approach their pedagogy with openness and perspective.
- It is helpful for instructors to do a self assessment at the end of the semester to reflect on how they supported students with mental health issues in their courses. A self-assessment can provide instructors with valuable information about what worked well in the course to support students with mental health issues and whether changes are needed for the next semester.
- Faculty’s ongoing efforts to be informed about students’ mental health issues by attending trainings, consulting with mental health experts, and teaching and learning experts on campus will have a profound impact on helping their students receive support and be successful.

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